



# For My Name

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### Acts 9:3-16

Fear is a powerful motivator. On one level, a healthy fear keeps us safe and teaches us to treat dangerous situations with caution. It protects our lives by helping us determine what might harm us or others. On another level, unhealthy fear incapacitates us, intimidates us, or keeps us from doing what we should do, even without cause. Then there are those circumstances for which we have learned the rules for keeping our lives safe and secure. These may be generally good rules and standards, yet God calls us to step beyond them into situations in which we see nothing but danger, uncertainty, and insecurity. How do we respond when we God calls us to move beyond our fears for some higher purpose? How do we respond to God's call to live in confidence in the face of uncertainty or danger?

Paul was one of those who lived his life basing his decisions in response to a general fear of what was unknown and different. He allowed his anxiety over the Christian threat to Judaism to guide his actions. He responded with violence to repress the growing talk about this Jesus character. He saw the growth of this band who followed Jesus in Jerusalem as a threat. Their influence was extending beyond Palestine, and he took steps to curb its expansion. Armed with letters from Jewish leaders, he set out for Damascus in an attempt to protect Judaism by attacking this threat directly, persecuting believers in hopes of turning them back to Judaism. They were a danger he feared needed eliminating.

Then God intervened.

Paul's actions had been about protecting the status quo. He had been working to preserve the purity of Judaism. He was protecting the Mosaic traditions, his people's way of life, their rituals, rites, and interpretations passed down for generations. He was working to protect God, zealously guarding what he knew to be true. The problem was that God neither needed nor wanted this protection. In the midst of his discomfort, anxiety, and fear over this conflicting understanding of God, Paul found himself face to face with the reality that he had been fighting against the very God he was striving to protect!

He had confused his traditions about God with God. He had confused the message he had learned and studied for being the correct and only manner of being true to the God who had called Israel into existence. He had confused his ideas about God with being the final and faithful representation of God's will. He had confused the form of his worship and religious expression with being the fulfillment of what God desired for all of Israel, if not for all humanity. Without even recognizing it, he had confused protection of his own position and tradition with serving God.

Ostensibly, Paul's life had been devoted to serving God. He had been reared as an honest Jew, following in the footsteps of faithful men who had come before him. He had studied under one of the most revered Jewish thinkers of his day. He had charted a course that was bringing him prominence and building a reputation among other Jews of his day. He was a leader in the making for his people, given to serving God with recognized and celebrated zeal. The problem he faced was a very simple one. It was a case of misdirection.

He thought he was doing the right thing. His purposes and desires were directed toward pleasing and serving God wholeheartedly. He was committed to do anything and everything in his power to demonstrate and fulfill his commitment to represent God and champion God's cause throughout Jewry. He held the very best of intentions. Unfortunately, his application and understanding failed.

Rather than championing God's cause, he was actively persecuting the One he tried to serve. That came as a shock to his system. Paul found himself struck with blindness on that road to Damascus, but the blindness was not his greatest distress. It was simply the vehicle God used to grab his attention. His real distress came from assessing all he knew about Judaism and Jesus and fitting it all back together in a new pattern.

He had to confront his fears about Jesus and the change it might make to his entire worldview and sense of security. He had to learn a wholly new way of encountering and serving God. He had to give up a lifetime of dependence upon his traditions, rites, rituals, works, and self-reliance. He had to learn about accepting God's grace as sufficient, leaning to live by faith instead of the religious constructs he had received. It was a scary moment. He had to let go of everything on which he had depended for security, comfort, and peace. It was the beginning of a brand new life for Paul, a brand new outlook. It forced him to let go of his entire support structure and cast his all on God alone.

All of his previous life was lived in God's name, but deep down it was focused on Paul's own cause. He lived by structures that placed his personal importance and priorities in a prominent position. They gave him value and security, and when all was said and done, that was his purpose in life.

God wanted more of Paul. God called him to orient his service in accord with his words and his stated purpose, not his traditions and the reality of his actions. God forced Paul to take a new look at the character of his actions. God claimed a new vision for Paul's life, a mission that would no longer focus on his comfort, status, power, and prominence. Rather, his would be a life focused on serving God's purposes. Only indirectly would that give Paul status and prominence, and not in a way he had been seeking them.

It is easy for us to look at Paul's life and see that he was far from God's purpose. It is not hard to understand that persecuting people for their beliefs is entirely wrong, yet it has been the norm throughout history more than we would like to believe. Forcing others into our own molds of doctrine and practice has been normative throughout history. The Romans accused Christians of atheism, a crime of treason against the social order. The Crusades attempted to convert the infidels at the point of the sword. The Inquisition attempted to force doctrinal conformity by putting heretics to death. Paul's actions were not so different, but God called him to a new pattern of living, a new model of life.

It is a little harder for us to see how our own actions follow the pattern Paul was living, a pattern God wanted to change dramatically. Paul considered himself as serving God and persecuting heretics, the followers of Jesus. He was determined that his actions fit within God's purpose, yet discovered that God saw reality differently. God interpreted Paul's actions as persecuting God.

He claimed to serve God, yet served himself. He claimed to persecute the unfaithful to God, yet he was the one being unfaithful. Recognizing and accepting that reality took God's special intervention.

How easily we get caught up in the whirlwind of our pet ideas and concerns! How easily we trap ourselves in serving our own self-interests, even without recognizing it. Paul was concerned with a life of security and comfort. God called him to serve others at great cost to himself.

It was not intentional. He had never meant to work against God's purposes. He had fallen prey to the enticing concept that his ideas, values, and traditions were God's. He allowed his fears to dictate the direction of his life and build comfort for himself. In God's name, Paul lived for himself. Are we ready to step beyond our fears to live for the name and sake of Christ, or will we live for our own?

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